HOGARTH LIVING POETS

No. 9. TRANSITIONAL POEM

By C. DAY LEWIS

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TRANSITIONAL POEM

Hogarth Living Poets

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TRANSITIONAL POEM

C. DAY LEWIS

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THIS WORK

IS

DEDICATED

TO

R. E. WARNER

PART I

"Ira brevis, longa est pietas, recidiva voluptas;
Et cum posse perit, mens tamen una manet."

MAXIMIAN.

I

Now I have come to reason
And cast my schoolboy clout,
Disorder I see is without,
And the mind must sweat a poison
Keener than Thessaly's brew;
A pus that, discharged not thence,
Gangrenes the vital sense
And makes disorder true.
It is certain we shall attain
No life till we stamp on all
Life the tetragonal
Pure symmetry of brain.

I felt, in my scorning
Of common poet's talk,
As arrogant as the hawk
When he mounts above the morning.
"Behold man's droll appearance,
Faith wriggling upon his hooks,
Chin-deep in Eternal Flux
Angling for reassurance!"
I care not if he retorts—
"Of all that labour and wive
And worship, who would give
A fiddlestick for these thoughts

That sluggishly yaw and bend,
Fat strings of barges drawn
By a tug they have never seen
And never will comprehend?"

I sit in a wood and stare
Up at untroubled branches
Locked together and staunch as
Though girders of the air:
And think, the first wind rising
Will crack that intricate crown
And let the daylight down.
But there is naught surprising
Can explode the single mind:—
Let figs from thistles fall
Or stars from their pedestal,
This architecture will stand.

2

Come, soul, let us not fight
Like cynical Chinee
Beneath umbrella, nor wish to trade
Upon neutrality.
For the mind must cope with
All elements or none—
Bask in dust along with weevils,
Or criticise the sun.

Look, where cloud squadrons are
Stampeded by the wind,
A boy's kite sits as calm as Minos
If the string be sound:
But if there are no hands
To keep the cable tense
And no eyes to mark a flaw in it,
What use the difference
Between a gust that twitters
Along the wainscot at dawn
And a burly wind playing the zany
In fields of barleycorn?

The time has gone when we
Could sprawl at ease between
Light and darkness, and deduce
Omnipotence from our Mean.
For us the gregorian
Example of those eyes
That risked hell's blight and heaven's blinding
But dared not compromise.

3

That afternoon we lay on Lillington Common
The land wallowed around us in the sunlight;
But finding all things my strenuous sense included
Ciphers new-copied by the indefinite sunlight,

I fell once more under the shadow of my Sphinx.
The aimlessness of buttercup and beetle
So pestered me, I would have cried surrender
To the fossil certitudes of Tom, Dick, and Harry,
Had I known how or believed that such a surrender
Could fashion aught but a dead Sphinx from the live
    Sphinx.
  Later we lit a fire, and the hedge of darkness—
Garnished with not a nightingale nor a glow-worm—
Sprang up like the beanstalk by which our Jack
    aspired once.
Then, though each star seemed little as a glow-worm
Perched on Leviathan's flank, and equally terrible
My tenure of this plateau that sloped on all sides
Into annihilation—yet was I lord of
Something: for, seeing the fall of a burnt-out faggot
Make all the night sag down, I became lord of
Light's interplay—stoker of an old parable.

4

Come up, Methuselah,
You doddering superman!
Give me an instant realized
And I'll outdo your span.

In that one moment of evening
When roses are most red

I can fold back the firmament,
I can put time to bed.

Abraham, stint your tally
Of concubines and cattle!
Give place to me—capitalist
In more intrinsic metal.

I have a lover of flesh
And a lover that is a sprite:
To-day I lie down with finite,
To-morrow with infinite.

That one is a constant
And suffers no eclipse,
Though I feel sun and moon burning
Together on her lips.

This one is a constant,
But she's not kind at all;
She raddles her gown with my despairs
And paints her lip with gall.

My lover of flesh is wild,
And willing to kiss again;
She is the potency of earth
When woods exhale the rain.

My lover of air, like Artemis
Spectrally embraced,
Shuns the daylight that twists her smile
To mineral distaste.

Twin poles energic, they
Stand fast and generate
This spark that crackles in the void
As between fate and fate.

5

My love is a tower.
Standing up in her
I parley with planets
And the casual wind.
Arcturus may grind
Against our wall:—he whets
A tropic appetite,
And decorates our night.
"What happier place
For Johnny Head-in-Air,
Who never would hear
Time mumbling at the base?"

I will not hear, for she's
My real Antipodes,

And our ingrowing loves
Shall meet below earth's spine
And there shall intertwine,
Though Babel falls above.
Time, we allow, destroys
All aërial toys:
But to assail love's heart
He has no strategy,
Unless he suck up the sea
And pull the earth apart.

6

Dismayed by the monstrous credibility
Of all antinomies, I climbed the fells
To Easedale Tarn. Could I be child again
And grip those skirts of cloud the matriarch sky
Draggled on mere and hillside? . . . ("So the dog
Returns to his vomit," you protest. Well only
The dog can tell what virtue lies in his vomit.)
Sleep on, you fells and profound dales: there's no
Material wind or rain can insulate
The mind against its own forked speculation,
When once that storm sets in: and then the flash
That bleakly enlightens a few sour acres leaves but
A more Egyptian darkness whence it came.

Mountains are the musicians; they despise
Their audience: but the wind is a popular preacher
And takes more from his audience than he gives them.
How can I wear the clouds, who feel each mountain
Yearn from its flinty marrow to abdicate
Sublimity and globe-trot with the wind?
By Easedale Tarn, where I sought a comforter,
I found a gospel sterner than repentance.
Prophetic earth, you need no lumber of logic
Who point your arguments alike with a primrose
And a sick sheep coughing among the stones:
And I have only words; yet must they both
Outsoar the mountain and lap up the wind.

7

Few things can more inflame
This far too combative heart
Than the intellectual Quixotes of the age
Prattling of abstract art.

No one would deny it—
But for a blind man's passion
Cassandra had been no more than a draggle-skirt,
Helen a ten-year fashion.
Yet had there not been one hostess
Ever whose arms waylaid

Like the tough bramble a princeling's journey, or
At the least no peasant maid
Redressing with rude heat
Nature's primeval wrong,
Epic had slumbered on beneath his blindness
And Helen lacked her song.

(So the antique balloon
Wobbles with no defence
Against the void but a grapnel that hops and ploughs
Through the landscape of sense.)

Phrase-making, dress-making—
Distinction's hard to find;
For thought must play the mannequin, strut in phrase,
Or gape with the ruck: and mind,
Like body, from covering gets
Most adequate display.
Yet time trundles this one to the rag-and-bone man,
While that other may
Reverberate all along
Man's craggy circumstance—
Naked enough to keep its dignity
Though it eye God askance.

PART II

"Do I contradict myself?
Very well then, I contradict myself;
I am large, I contain multitudes."

W. Whitman.

8

It is becoming now to declare my allegiance,
To dig some reservoir for my springtime's pain,
Bewilderment and pride, before their insurgence
Is all sopped up in this dry regimen.

Laughable dwarfs, you may twirl and tweak my heart,—
Have I not fought with Anakim at the crossways?
Once I was Cicero, though pedant fate
Now bids me learn the grammar of my days.

These, then, have my allegiance; they whose shining
Convicted my false dawn of flagrant night,
Yet ushered up the sun, as poets leaning
Upon a straw surmise the infinite.

You, first, who ground my lust to love upon
Your gritty humorous virginity,
Then yielding to its temper suddenly
Proved what a Danube can be struck from stone:
With you I ran the gauntlet for my prime,
Then living in the moment lived for all time.

Next the hawk-faced man, who could praise an apple
In terms of peach and win the argument. Quick

Was he to trip the shambling rhetoric
Of laws and lions: yet abstract turned the tables
And his mind, almost, with a whiff of air
Clothed first in a woman and after in a nightmare.

She next, sorrow's familiar, who turned
Her darkness to our light; that "brazen leech"
Alleviating the vain cosmic itch
With fact coated in formulæ lest it burned
Our tongue. She shall have portion in my praise,
And live in me, not memory, for always.

Last the tow-haired poet, never done
With cutting and planing some new gnomic prop
To jack his all too stable universe up:—
Conduct's Old Dobbin, thought's chameleon.
Single mind copes with split intelligence,
Breeding a piebald strain of truth and nonsense.

These have I loved and chosen, once being sure
Some spacious vision waved upon their eyes
That troubles not the common register;
And love them still, knowing it otherwise.

Knowing they held no mastership in wisdom
Or wit save by certificate of my love,
I have found out a better way to praise them—
Nestor shall die and let Patroclus live.

So I declare it. These are they who built
My house and never a stone of it laid agley.
So cheat I memory that works in gilt
And stucco to restore a fallen day.

9

I thought to have had some fame
As the village idiot
Condemned at birth to sit
Oracle of blind alleys:
Shanghaied aboard the galleys
I got reprieve and shame.

Tugging at his oar
This idiot who, for lack
Of the striped Zodiac,
Swore that every planet
Was truck, soon found some merit
In his own abject star.

Then there came disgust
Of the former loon who could
Elbow a bridge and brood
From Chaos to last Trump
Over the imbecile pomp
Of waters dribbling past.

For what can water be
But so much less or more
Gravamen to the oar?—
(Reasons our reformed dunce)
It is high time to renounce
This village idiocy.

10

How they would jeer at us—
Ulysses, Herodotus,
The hard-headed Phœnicians
Or, of later nations,
Columbus, the Pilgrim Fathers
And a thousand others
Who laboured only to find
Some pittance of new ground,
Merchandise or women.
Those rude and bourgeois seamen
Got glory thrown in
As it were with every ton
Of wave that swept their boat,
And would have preferred a coat
For keeping off the spray.

Since the heroes lie
Entombed with the recipe
Of epic in their heart,

And have buried—it seems—that art
Of minding one's own business
Magnanimously, for us
There's nothing but to recant
Ambition, and be content
Like the poor child at play
To find a holiday
In the sticks and mud
Of a familiar road.

II

If I bricked up ambition and gave no air
To the ancestral curse that gabbles there,
  I could leave wonder on the latch
  And with a whole heart watch
The calm declension of an English year.

I would be pædagogue—hear poplar, lime
And oak recite the seasons' paradigm.
  Each year a dynasty would fall
  Within my orchard wall—
I'd be their Tacitus, and they my time.

Among those pippin princes I could ease
A heart long sick for some Hesperides:
  Plainsong of thrushes in the soul
  Would drown that rigmarole
Of Eldorados, Auks, and Perilous Seas.

(The God they cannot see sages define
In a slow-motion. If I discipline
  My flux into a background still
  And sure as a waterfall
Will not a rainbow come of that routine?)

So circumscribe the vampire and he'll die soon—
Lunacy and anæmia take their own.
  Grounded in temperate soil I'll stay,
  An orchard god, and say
My glow-worms hold a candle to the moon.

12

Enough. There is no magic
Circle nor prophylactic
Sorcery of garlic
Will keep the vampire in.
See!—that authentic
Original of sin
Slides from his cabin
Up to my sober trees
And spits disease.
Thus infected, they
Start a sylvan rivalry,
Poplar and oak surpass
Their natural green, and race
Each other to the stars.

Since my material
Has chosen to rebel,
It were most politic—
Ere I also fall sick—
To escape this Eden.
Indeed there has been no peace
For any garden
Or for any trees
Since Priapus died,
And lust can no more ride
Over self-love and pride.

Leave Eden to the brutes:
For he who lets his sap
Run downward to the roots
Will wither at the top
And wear fool's-cap.
I am no English lawn
To build a smooth tradition
Out of Time's recession
And centuries of dew . . .
Adam must subdue
The indestructible serpent,
Outstaring it: content
If he can transplant
One slip from paradise
Into his own eyes.

13

Can the mole take
A census of the stars?
Our firmament will never
Give him headache.

The man who nuzzles
In a woman's lap
Burrows toward a night
Too deep for puzzles:

While he, whose prayer
Holds up the starry system
In a God's train, sees nothing
Difficult there.

So I, perhaps,
Am neither mole nor mantis;
I see the constellations,
But by their gaps.

14

In heaven, I suppose, lie down together
Agonised Pilate and the boa-constrictor
That swallows anything: but we must seize
One horn or the other of our antitheses.

When I consider each independent star
Wearing its world of darkness like a fur
And rubbing shoulders with infinity,
I am content experience should be
More discontinuous than the points pricked
Out by the mazy course of a derelict,
Iceberg, or Flying Dutchman, and the heart
Stationary and passive as a chart.
In such star-frenzy I could boast, betwixt
My yester and my morrow self are fixed
All the birds carolling and all the seas
Groaning from Greenwich to the Antipodes.

But an eccentric hour may come, when systems
Not stars divide the dark; and then life's pistons
Pounding into their secret cylinder
Begin to tickle the most anchorite ear
With hints of mechanisms that include
The man. And once that rhythm arrests the blood,
Who would be satisfied his mind is no
Continent but an archipelago?
They are preposterous paladins and prance
From myth to myth, who take an Agag stance
Upon the needle points of here and now,
Where only angels ought to tread. Allow
One jointure feasible to man, one state
Squared with another—then he can integrate

A million selves and where disorder ruled
Straddle a chaos and beget a world.

Peals of the New Year once for me came tumbling
Out of the narrow night like clusters of humming-
Birds loosed from a black bag, and rose again
Irresponsibly to silence: but now I strain
To follow them and see for miles around
Men square or shrug their shoulders at the sound.
Then I remember the pure and granite hills
Where first I caught an ideal tone that stills,
Like the beloved's breath asleep, all din
Of earth at traffic: silence's first-born,
Carrying over each sensual ravine
To inform the seer and uniform the seen.
So from this ark, this closet of the brain,
The dove emerges and flies back again
With a Messiah sprig of certitude—
Promise of ground below the sprawling flood.

15

Desire is a witch
And runs against the clock.
It can unstitch
The decent hem
Where space tacks on to time:

It can unlock
Pandora's privacies.

It puffs in these
Top-gallants of the mind,
And away I stand
On the elemental gale
Into an ocean
That the liar Lucian
Had never dared retail.

When my love leans with all
Her shining breast and shoulder,
I know she is older
Than Ararat the hill,
And yet more young
Than the first daffodil
That ever shews a spring.

When her eyes delay
On me, so deep are they
Tunnelled by love, although
You poured Atlantic
In this one and Pacific
In the other, I know
They would not overflow.

Desire clicks back
Like cuckoo into clock;
Leaves me to explain
Eyes that a tear will drown
And a body where youth
Nor age will long remain
To implicate the truth.

It seems that we must call
Anything truth whose well
Is deep enough;
For the essential
Philosopher-stone, desire,
Needs no other proof
Than its own fire.

16

Remembering how between
Embrace and ultimate bone
Always have interposed
Strata undiagnosed
In Love's geology;
And even memory
Is bullied by the flesh
Out of its usual dish;
I railed upon desire,

The silly self-betrayer
Whose Cronic appetite
Gobbles up all his brood;
And I found, in body's despite,
A moral to clinch the mood.

They say that a mathematician
Once fell to such a passion
For x and y, he locked
His door to keep outside
Whatever might distract
Him from his heavenly bride:
And presently died
In the keenest of blisses
With a dozen untasted dishes
Outside his door.
O man,
Feed Cronos with a stone.
He's easily decoyed
Who, perched on any throne,
Happily gnaws the void.

From this theoric tower
Corn-land and city seem
A lovely skiagram:
You could not guess what sour
Contagion has outworn
Those streets of men and corn.

Let body doubt: the pure
Shadow will reassure,
For shadow gives a free
Licence to lunacy.—
And yet fools say it is
The heart that's credulous . . .
For once, O sceptic heart,
Will you not play your part?

17

When nature plays hedge-schoolmaster,
Shakes out the gaudy map of summer
And shows me charabanc, rose, barley-ear
And every bright-winged hummer,

He only would require of me
To be the sponge of natural laws
And learn no more of that cosmography
Than passes through the pores.

Why must I then unleash my brain
To sweat after some revelation
Behind the rose, heedless if truth maintain
On the rose-bloom her station?

When bullying April bruised mine eyes
With sleet-bound appetites and crude

Experiments of green, I still was wise
And kissed the blossoming rod.

Now summer brings what April took,
Riding with fanfares from the south,
And I should be no Solomon to look
My Sheba in the mouth.

Charabancs shout along the lane
And summer gales bay in the wood
No less superbly because I can't explain
What I have understood.

Let logic analyse the hive,
Wisdom's content to have the honey:
So I'll go bite the crust of things and thrive
While hedgerows still are sunny.

PART III

"But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still centrally disport in mute calm."

HERMAN MELVILLE.

18

On my right are trees and a lank stream sliding
Impervious as Anaconda to the suns
Of autumn; and the boughs are vipers writhing
To slough the summer from their brittle bones.
Here is the Trojan meadow, here Scamander;
And I, the counterfeit Achilles, feel
A river-god surge up to tear me asunder,
A serpent melancholy bruise my heel.

On my left is the city famed for talk
And tolerance. Its old men run about
Chasing reality, chasing the Auk
With butterfly-nets. Its young men swell the rout
Gaping at Helen in the restaurant,
Mocking at Helen from monastic towers.
Boy Achilles, who has known Helen too long
To scold or worship, stands outside and glowers.

Between the stream and city a rubbish heap
Proclaims the pleasant norm with smouldering stenches.
See! the pathetic pyre where Trojans keep
Well out of sight the prey of time's revenges;
Old butterfly-nets, couches where lovers lay—

All furniture out of fashion. So the fire
Guts the proud champions of the real: so Troy
Cremates her dead selves and ascends to higher.

Grecians awake, salute the happy norm!
Now may Achilles find employment still;
And once again the blood-lust will grow warm,
Gloating on champions he could never kill.
And if Scamander rears up and pursues,
This ring of rubbish fire will baffle all
His rage. Hero, you're safe, in the purlieus
Of God's infernal acre king and thrall.

19

When April comes alive
Out of the small bird's throat,
Achilles in the sunshine
Kept on his overcoat.
Trojan and Greek at battle,
Helen wantoning—
None but heroic metal
Could ignore the spring.

When honeysuckle and summer
Suffocate the lane,
That sulky boil was broken
And I at last a man.

I'd have stripped off my skin to
The impacts of hate and love—
Rebel alone because I
Could not be slave enough.

Bodies now, not shadows,
Intercept the sun:
It takes no rod to tell me
That discipline's begun.
Seeking the fabled fusion
From love's last chemical,
I found the experiment
Makes monads of us all;

For love still keeps apart,
And all its vanities
But emphasise higher heaven,
As February trees
When rooks begin their noisy
Coronation of the wood
Are turreted with folly
Yet grow toward some good.

I thought, since love can harness
Pole with contrary pole,
It must be earthed in darkness
Deeper than mine or mole.

Now that I have loved
A while and not gone blind,
I think love's terminals
Are fixed in fire and wind.

20

How often, watching the windy boughs
Juggle with the moon, or leaning
My body against a wind
That sets all earth careening;
Or when I have seen flames browsing
On the prairie of night and tossing
Their muzzles up at Orion;
Or the sun's hot arsenal spent
On a cloud salient
Till the air explodes with light;
How often have I perceived a delight
Which parallels the racing mind,
But never rides it off the course.

Another fire, another wind
Now take the air, and I
Am matched with a stricter ecstasy.
For he whom love and fear enlist
To comb his universe
For what Protagoras missed,

Needs be reborn hermaphrodite
And put himself out to nurse
With a syren and a sybil.
So the spider gradually,
Drawing fine systems from his belly,
Includes creation with a thread
And squats on the navel of his world.
Yet even that arch-fakir must feed
Austerity on warm blood.

The tracks of love and fear
Lead back till I disappear
Into that ample terminus
From which all trains draw out
Snorting towards an Ultima Thule.
Nothing is altered about
The place, except its gloom is newly
Lacquered by an unaccustomed eye,
Yet cannot blunt mine eyes now
To the clear finality
Of all beginnings.
Outside
In the diamond air of day
The engines simmer with delay,
Desiring a steely discipline
No less, though now quite satisfied
They travel a loop-line.

21

My lover is so happy, you well might say
One of the Hellene summers had lost its way
And taken shelter underneath her breast.
None but its proper fear can now arrest
Our meteoric love: but still we grieve
That curves of mind and body should outlive
All expectation, and the heart become
A blunt habitual arc, a pendulum
Wagged by the ghost of its first impetus.
Love keeps the bogey slave to admonish us
Of vanity, yet through this fear we scrawl
Our sky with love's vain comets ere it fall.

And then, up on High Stoy standing alone,
We saw the excellence of the serious down
That shakes the seasons from its back, and bears
No obligation but to wind and stars.
What paroxysm of green can crack those huge
Ribs grown from Chaos, stamped by the Deluge?

Later, within the wood sweetly reclining
On bluebell and primrose, we loved; whose shining
Made a poor fiction of the royal skies,
But were to love alone repositories
Of what by-product wonder it could spare

From lips and eyes. Yet nothing had such power
As prattle of small flowers within the brake
To mount the panic heart and rein it back
From the world's edge. For they, whose virtue lies
In a brief act of beauty, summarize
Earth's annual passion and leave the naked earth
Still dearer by their death than by their birth.
So we, who are love's hemispheres hiding
Beneath the coloured ordeal of our spring,
Shall be disclosed, and I shall see your face
An autumn evening certain of its peace.

22

It is an easier thing
To give up great possessions
Than to forego one farthing
Of the rare unpossessed.

But I've been satellite
Long enough to this moon,
The pharisee of night
Shining by tradition.

There's no star in the sky
But gazing makes it double
And the infatuate eye
Can breed dilemmas on it.

Wiser it were to sheath
My burning heart in clay
Than by this double breath
To magnify the tomb.

I'd live like grass and trees,
Familiar of the earth,
Proving its basalt peace
Till I was unperturbed

By synod of the suns
Or a moon's insolence
As the ant when he runs
Beneath sky-scraping grass.

23

You've trafficked with no beast but unicorn
Who dare hold me in scorn
For my dilemmas. Nor have you perceived
The compass-point suggest
An east by pointing to the west,
Or you'd not call me thus deceived
For fixing my desire
On this magnetic north to gyre
Under the sheer authority of ice.

I have seen what impertinence
Stokes up the dingy rhetoric of sense:
I've seen your subaltern ambitions rise
Yellow and parallel
As smoke from garden cities that soon fades
In air it cannot even defile. Poor shades,
Not black enough for hell,
Learn of this poplar which beyond its height
Aspires not, and will bend beneath the thumb
Of every wind; yet when the stars come
It is an omen darker than the night.

The rest may go. No satisfaction lies
In such. And you alone shall hear
My pride, whose love's the accurate frontier
Of all my enterprise.
While your beauties' succession
Holds my adventure in a flowery chain
As the spring hedgerows hold the lane,
How can I care whether it ends upon
Marsh or metropolis?

But look within my heart, see there
The tough stoic ghost of a pride was too severe
To risk an armistice
With lesser powers than death; but rather died

Welcoming that iron in the soul
Which keeps the spirit whole,
Since none but ghosts are satisfied
To see a glory passing and let it pass.

For I had been a modern moth and hurled
Myself on many a flaming world,
To find its globe was glass.
In you alone
I met the naked light, by you became
Veteran of a flame
That burns away all but the warrior bone.
And I shall know, if time should falsify
This star the company of my night,
Mine is the heron's flight
Which makes a solitude of any sky.

24

Farewell again to this adolescent moon;
I say it is a bottle
For papless poets to feed their fancy on.
Once mine sucked there, and I dreamed
The heart a record for the gramophone—
One scratch upon the surface,
And the best music of that sphere is gone.

So I put passion away
In a cold storage and took its tune on trust,
While proper men with church-bells
Signal a practised or a dreamt-of lust . . .
No fear could sublimate
The ennui of a tomb where music slept
In artificial frost,
Nor could it long persuade me to accept
Rigidity for peace.
Moon-stricken I worked out a solitude
Of sand and sun, believing
No other soil could bear the genuine rood.
But nothing grew except
The shadow at my heels. Now I confess
There's no virtue in sand:
It is the rose that makes the wilderness.
I thought integrity
Needed a desert air; I saw it plain,
A chimney of stone at evening,
A monolith on the skyline after rain.
Instead, the witless sun
Fertilised that old succubus and bred
A skeleton in a shadow.
Let cactus spring where hermits go to bed
With those they come to kill.
Three-legged I ran with that importunate curse,
Till I guessed (in the sexual trance

Or playing darts with drunken schoolmasters)
  The integrity that's laid bare
Upon the edge of common furniture.
  Now to the town returning
I accept the blind collisions that ensure
  Soul's ektogenesis.

25

Where is the true, the central stone
That clay and vapour zone,
That earthquakes budge nor vinegar bites away,
That rivets man against Doomsday?

You will not find it there, although
You sink a shaft below
Despair and see the roots of death close-curled
About the kernel of your world.

Where is the invaluable star
Whose beams enlacèd are
The scaffolding of truth, whose stages drawn
Aside unshutter an ideal dawn?

It is well hid. You would not find
It there, though far you mined
Up through the golden seams that cram the night
And walked those galleries of light.

Above, below, the Flux tight-packed
Stages its sexual act—
An ignominious scuffling in the dark
Where brute encounters brute baresark.

Keep to the pithead, then, nor pry
Beyond what meets the eye,
Since household stuff, stone walls, mountains and trees
Placard the day with certainties.

For individual truth must lie
Within diversity;
Under the skin all creatures are one race,
Proved integers but by their face.

So he, who learns to comprehend
The form of things, will find
They in his eye that purest star have sown
And changed his mind to singular stone.

26

Chiefly to mind appears
That hour on Silverhowe
When evening's lid hung low
And the sky was about our ears.
Buoyed between fear and love
We watched in eastward form

The armadas of the storm
And sail superbly above;
So near, they'd split and founder
On the least jag of sense,
One false spark fire the immense
Broadside the confounding thunder.
They pass, give not a salvo,
And in their rainy wash
We hear the horizons crash
With monitors of woe.

Only at highest power
Can love and fear become
Their equilibrium,
And in that eminent hour
A virtue is made plain
Of passionate cleavage
Like the hills' cutting edge
When the sun sets to rain.
This is the single mind,
This the star-solved equation
Of life with life's negation:
A deathless cell designed
To demonstrate death's act,
Which, the more surely it moves
To earth's influence, but proves
Itself the more intact.

27

With me, my lover makes
  The clock assert its chime:
But when she goes, she takes
  The mainspring out of time.

Yet this time-wrecking charm
  Were better than love dead
And its hollow alarum
  Hammered out on lead.

Why should I fear that Time
  Will superannuate
These workmen of my rhyme—
  Love, despair and hate?

Fleeing the herd, I came
  To a graveyard on a hill,
And felt its mould proclaim
  The bone gregarious still.

Boredoms and agonies
  Work out the rhythm of bone:—
No peace till creature his
  Creator has outgrown.

Passion dies from the heart
  But to infect the marrow;
Holds dream and act apart
  Till the man discard his narrow

Sapience and folly
  Here, where the graves slumber
In a green melancholy
  Of overblown summer.

PART IV

"The hatches are let down
And the night meets the day
The spirit comes to its own
The beast to its play."

W. H. Auden.

28

In the beginning was the Word.
Under different skies now, I recall
The childhood of the Word.
Before the Fall,
Was dancing on the green with sun and moon:
And the Word was with God.
Years pass, relaxed in a faun's afternoon.
And the Word was God.
For him rise up the litanies of leaves
From the tormented wood, and semi-breves
Of birds accompany the simple dawn.
Obsequious to his mood the valleys yawn,
Nymphs scamper or succumb, waterfalls part
The hill-face with vivacious smiles. The heart,
Propped up against its paradise, records
Each wave of godhead in a sea of words.
He grows a wall of sunflower and moonflower blent
To protest his solitude and to prevent
Wolf or worm from trespassing on his rule.
Observe how paradise can make a fool:
They can't get in; but he—for a god no doubt
Is bound by his own laws—cannot get out.
And the Word was made flesh,
Under different skies now,

Wrenching a stony song from a scant acre,
The Word still justifies its Maker.
  Green fields were my slippers,
    Sky was my hat,
  But curiosity
    Killed the cat.
  For this did I burst
    My daisy band—
  To be clapped in irons
    By a strange hand?
Nevertheless, you are well out of Eden:
For there's no wonder where all things are new;
No dream where all is sleep; no vision where
Seer and seen are one; nor prophecy
Where only echo waits upon the tongue.
  Now he has come to a country of stone walls,
Breathes a precarious air.
Frontiers of adamant declare
A cold autonomy. There echo starves;
And the mountain ash bleeds stoically there
Above the muscular stream.
What cairn will show the way he went?
A harrow rusting on defeated bones?
Or will he leave a luckier testament—
Rock deeply rent,
Fountains of spring playing upon the air?

29

Those Himalayas of the mind
Are not so easily possessed:
There's more than precipice and storm
Between you and your Everest.

You who declare the peak of peaks
Alone will satisfy your want,
Can you distil a grain of snow?
Can you digest an adamant?

Better by far the household cock
Scratching the common yard for corn,
Whose rainy voice all night at will
Can signify a private dawn.

Another bird, sagacious too,
Circles in plain bewilderment
Where shoulder to shoulder long waves march
Towards a magnetic continent.

"What are these rocks impede our pomp?"
Gesticulating to the sun
The waves part ranks, sidle and fume,
Then close behind them and march on.

The waves advance, the Absolute Cliffs
Unaccountably repel:
They linger grovelling; where assault
Has failed, attrition may tell.

The bird sees nothing to the point;
Shrugs an indifferent wing; proceeds
From rock to rock in the mid-ocean
Peering for barnacles and weeds.

30

In the chaotic age
  This was enough for me—
Her beauty walked the page
  And it was poetry.

Now that the crust has cooled,
  The floods are kept in pen,
Mountains have got their mould
  And air its regimen.

Nothing of heat remains
  But where the sacred hill
Conserves within her veins
  The fiery principle.

Fire can no longer shake
  Stars from their sockets down;
It burns now but to make
  Vain motions above the town.

This glum canal, has lain
  Opaque night after night,
One hour will entertain
  A jubilee of light,

And show that beauty is
  A motion of the mind
By its own dark caprice
  Directed or confined.

31

Where is the fool would want those days again
    Whose light was globed in pain
  And danced upon a point of wire?
  When the charged batteries of desire
    Had licence but to pass
Into a narrow room of frosted glass?

The globe was broken and the light made free
    Of a king's territory.

Artemis then, that huntress pale,
Flung her black dogs upon the trail:
So with one glance around
The hunted lightning ran and went to ground.

Safer perhaps within that cell to stay
Which qualified its ray
And gave it place and period,
Than be at liberty where God
Has put no firmament
Of glass to prove dark and light different.

But Artemis leaps down. At her thin back
Wheel the shades in a pack.
At once that old habit of fire
Jumps out, not stopping to inquire
Whether it follows or flies,
Content to use the night for exercise.

And I, when at the sporting queen's halloo
The light obedient flew
Blazing its trail across the wild—
Resigned now but not reconciled,
That ancient Sphinx I saw
Put moon and shades like mice beneath its paw.

32

The red nor-easter is out:
Trees in the covert strain
Like dogs upon a leash
And snuff the hurricane.
Another wind and tree now
Are constant to their west:
The breath that scours the midday
Unseen, is manifest
In this embittered thorn—
Forcing the stubborn frame
To grow one way and point
His constancy and aim.

This wind that fills the hollow
Sky, of a vacuum
Was purely bred. The thorn once
In modest seed lay mum
That squats above the Atlantic
Promontoried on pride.
For my tenacious tree
Requires not, to decide
That he has roots somewhere,
A tropic foliage;
Since that the leaf recurs
Is a sufficient gauge.

Again, what of this glass
Whereby the formulæ
Of sense should all be solved?
It cannot enlarge a flea
Nor accurately define
The features of a star.
Gazing through it I saw
Nothing particular
Distant or close. A summer
Accident it was
Explained its property.
It is a burning-glass
Which interrupts the sun
To make him more intense,
And touch to a single flame
The various heap of sense.

33

Seventeen months ago
We came to the mine on the moor. A crow
Sees more than meets the eye—
What marrow in fleshless bones may lie.
And now I passed by a forbidding coast
Where ironworks rust
On each headland: goats crop the salted grass:
Steam oozes out of the mud. Earth has

No promise for proprietors. I from far
Came, and passing saw something oracular.
Put down the tripod here.

I stretched a line from pole to pole
To hang my paper lanterns on. Poor soul,
By such a metaphysical conceit
Thinking to make ends meet!
This line, spun from the blind heart—
What could it do but prove the poles apart?
More expert now, I twist the dials, catch
Electric hints, curt omens such
As may be heard by one tapping the air
That belts an ambiguous sphere.
Put down the tripod here.

This is the interregnum of my year;
All spring except the leaf is here,
All winter but the cold.
Bandage of snow for the first time unrolled
Lays bare the wounds given when any fate
And most men's company could humiliate:
Sterilized now; yet still they prick
And pulse beneath the skin, moving me like
An engine driven on
By sparks of its own combustion.
There are going to be some changes made to-day.

Then add to this that I
Have known, and shall again, the greedy thigh;
Browned by that sun, but not betrayed,
Which puts the Dog-Star in the shade:
For though my world at one Equator meet,
These Arctic zones are still complete.
Baring my skin to every bruise
Love gives, I'll love the more; since they're but dues
That flesh must pay to bone
Till each is overthrown.
There are going to be some changes made to-day.

34

The hawk comes down from the air.
Sharpening his eye upon
A wheeling horizon
Turned scrutiny to prayer.

He guessed the prey that cowers
Below, and learnt to keep
The distance which can strip
Earth to its blank contours.

Then trod the air, content
With contemplation till
The truth of valley and hill
Should be self-evident.

Or as the little lark
Who veins the sky with song,
Asking from dawn to dark
No revenues of spring:

But with the night descends
Into his chosen tree,
And the famed singer ends
In anonymity.

So from a summer's height
I come into my peace;
The wings have earned their night,
And the song may cease.

NOTES

The central theme of this poem is the single mind. The poem is divided into four parts, which essentially represent four phases of personal experience in the pursuit of single-mindedness: it will be seen that a transition is intended from one part to the next such as implies a certain spiritual progress and a consequent shifting of aspect. As far as any definitions can be attached to these aspects, they may be termed (1) metaphysical, (2) ethical, (3) psychological; while (4) is an attempt to relate the poetic impulse with the experience as a whole. Formally, the parts fall with fair accuracy into the divisions of a theorem in geometry, *i.e.* general enunciation, particular enunciation, proof, corollaries. The following notes may be of assistance to the diligent; they are intended simply for the elucidation of the text, and do not necessarily imply assent to any proposition that may be advanced in them. C. D. L.

January 1929.

Page 9, lines 3–8, *cf.* Spinoza, *Letters*. " I would warn you that I do not attribute to nature either beauty or

deformity, order or confusion. Only in relation to our imagination can things be called beautiful or ugly, well-ordered or confused."

Page 9, line 4, *cf.* Spinoza, *De intell. emend.* "But above all a method must be thought out of healing the understanding and purifying it at the beginning. . . ."

Page 15, line 23, *cf.* Exodus x, 21 and 27.

Page 21, line 6, *cf.* Deuteronomy ix, 2 ; also i, 28.

Page 27, line 3 *sqq.*, *cf.* page 58, line 11.

Page 33, line 2, Cronos is here used as a symbol for desire.

Page 33, line 20 *sqq.*, contrast Donne :

> "But up into the watch-tower get,
> And see all things despoiled of fallacies."

Page 33, line 22, "skiagram"—a drawing in shadow, not strictly the Greek sense.

Page 47, line 6, *cf.* Dante, *Inferno* :

> "Ed egli a me : Questo misero modo
> Tengon l'anime triste di coloro,
> Che visser senza infamia e senza lodo."

Page 49, line 16, *cf.* Isaiah xxxv, 1.

Page 51, line 9–16, *cf.* Wyndham Lewis, *Art of Being Ruled*, Part 12, Chapter VII.

Page 51, line 21, "Fear and love" throughout this poem represent the general principles of attraction and repulsion.

Page 57, line 1, "the Word" in this poem stands for the individual poetic impulse, as a part of the Logos in the theologian's sense of "mind expressing God in the world."

Page 57, line 4, *cf.* "The Ballad of the Twa Brothers":

"'O when will you come hame again?
Dear Willie, tell to me!'
'When the sun and moon dance on yon green;
And that will never be.'"

Page 61, line 4, *cf.* Henry James, *The Ambassadors*: "Whether or no he had a grand idea of the lucid, he held that nothing ever was in fact—for anyone else—explained. One went through the vain motions, but it was mostly a waste of life."

Page 61, lines 9–12, *cf.* note on page 9, lines 3–8.

Page 62, line 21, *cf.* page 12, line 1.

Page 65, line 25, the refrain of a song sung by Miss Sophie Tucker.

Page 66, line 12, *cf.* page 9, line 15.

Page 66, lines 20–23, *cf.* Spinoza, *De intell. emend.* "Finally, perception is that wherein a thing is perceived through its essence alone. . . . A thing is said to be perceived through its essence alone when from the fact that I know something, I know what it is to know anything. . . ."

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